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AUTHOR Ghosn, Irma K.
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ABSTRACT

Experiences with the whole language approach to English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) instruction in a Lebanese kindergarten are described. Children's literature was selected for use in instruction, in part because few appropriate commercially prepared materials were available and in part because it presents appropriate language in an entertaining, meaningful context. Discussion here focuses on the use of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" (Eric Carle) in class by a teacher not trained in pedagogy. The technique used was to read the story aloud, wait for student response, reflect Arabic comments back in English, and encourage classroom discussion. Repetition of the story allowed the children to begin choral reading. The first and second days of class and another day about 1 week into the unit are chronicled, including a variety of group, individual, and free-play activities, during which the children incorporated story parts and related ideas into play. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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Whole language EFL with children's literature: The way it worked in one Kindergarten class

by

Irma K. Ghosn

Lebanese American University, Byblos
c/o 475 Riverside Dr. Suite 1846
New York, NY 10115

fax (USA) 212-870-2762
fax (Lebanon) 961-(01)-867098
phone: 961-(09)-944078 (res.)
e-mail: ighosn@lau.edu.lb

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Whole language EFL with children's literature:
The way it worked in one Kindergarten class

Irma K. Ghosn

The initial idea for the experiment described below came out of a series of workshops I have presented in Lebanon for Primary school English teachers. During the sessions it had become evident that although many schools were introducing English as Foreign, or Second, language in the early grades - as early as Kindergarten in many cases - appropriate materials were not as readily available. Most of the textbooks on the market fell into two categories: texts intended for children learning English in the United States, and texts for children learning English as a Foreign language in areas where English is not the language of the community. The texts intended for the U.S. market, even when written for ESL learners, were not suitable for the average Lebanese Kindergartners. First, the content of the lessons assumed that students possess a certain level of cultural awareness; second, the texts were not intended for 4 year olds, but were geared more for the cognitive level of 6-7 year olds; third, the cost of these texts was often too high, especially for the less affluent rural schools. The EFL texts intended for the developing countries, on the other hand, although less costly, were limited in content and structured around vocabulary and grammar exercises - even when the aim was to address communicative aspects of language. Furthermore, the content of these texts was also inappropriate for the very young children. These fragmented exercises, so typical to many EFL texts, clearly did not prepare the children to *learn in* English. Yet many of these children were going to study science, mathematics and perhaps other subjects as well in English. So something else was needed. (At the time of this writing, the situation shows much improvement, with several 'Big Book' series available. However, the cost is still a problem for many schools.)

Since I had used a whole language oriented approach and literature with some success in teaching EFL students in university classes, and had read about many successful literature-based, whole language reading programs in L1 contexts, I began to look at available children's literature as a possible tool to teach EFL to young learners. The idea was tested by a courageous and cooperative Kindergarten teacher in a private rural school in Lebanon.

Learning a whole language

Extensive L1 research tells us that children learn - and create - language by interacting with and manipulating language; not by sitting at their desks doing pencil and paper tasks in isolation from their peers, or drilling structures out of context, but by engaging in meaningful use of language in a community of language learners. Halliday (1975) and Vygotsky (1978), among others, have stressed on the social quality of language development. Attempts to fragment language into parts - grammatical patterns, vocabulary lists, or phonics families results in 'abstractions and nonsense' (Goodman et al. 1987), and destroys it (Rigg 1995). As a matter of fact, some educators claim that the traditional reading skill time is difficult, and actually even painful for many children (Holdaway, 1991) If fragmented skill lessons, workbooks and endless worksheets are not the best way for L1 learners to develop their language and master the art of reading and writing, they must be much less appropriate for young foreign language learners who need to learn a whole new language - *a whole language!* Who need to learn to listen, to speak, to read and to write in a new language, often without exposure to English outside school. Because language is an interactive process, children learning a language need ample opportunity to interact in a meaningful, interesting context and play with the language while developing vocabulary and structures. They need the collaboration of their peers and teachers in creating meaningful contexts and

negotiating meanings in those contexts. The constructivist theory suggests that they must "build knowledge from the inside in interaction with the environment" (Kamii 9). From this one can conclude that they cannot successfully acquire a new language through out-of-context drills and skill exercises. Yet that is still the way many primary grade EFL classes are set up.

Now that whole language has become a hot topic among language teachers, materials and textbooks advocating whole language have appeared on the market. However, textbooks that claim to cater to whole language actually contradict the whole philosophy which advocates language functions that are purposeful, functional and real to the learners, within a context of a curriculum that is flexible and evolves around the needs and interests of the children.

Benefits of children's literature

Gianelli (1991) describes a successful thematically based bi-lingual program and suggests that thematic instruction works "because theme-related language and vocabulary are used and reused in new contexts, all of which are meaningfully related". Children's own, immediate environment - themselves, the family, neighborhood and the school - are, of course, good sources of theme units, but in addition to these, nursery rhymes and children's literature offer a natural and interesting medium for language acquisition; they contain predictable, repetitive patterns that reinforce vocabulary and structures, and they are often highly *generative*, availing to the readers a variety of themes relevant to young learners. Quality literature presents a multitude of discussion topics - from the literal to the topics that transcend the story and allow children to link the story to their own lives, at times making generalizations of high level of sophistication as McConaghy (1990) has pointed out.

Just as children acquiring their first language begin developing it orally, young children learning a second language need to develop their oral language to

some extent before they can be expected to function in writing. However, in many classes that I had observed, young children were copying words and phrases they did not understand, and then in chorus "read" them to the teacher. Carefully chosen children's literature allows children to develop their receptive language in an entertaining, meaningful context and naturally invites them to repeat many of the predictable words and phrases which they gradually take ownership of and add to their receptive and productive language. All the activities of the following experiment heavily emphasize development of oral language. Language and the knowledge that children construct through the use of language are both very much part of the individual children, and the means and strategies they employ when engaging in learning vary. Thus it is important that the activities provided will accommodate the diverse needs of the young learners. Open-ended activities that allow for children's interest and input are essential. Newman (1985) aptly talks about, not assignments, but 'invitations' to learning. However, that does not mean teaching without objectives or goals, but the means through which the objectives are reached must be flexible, and, to some extent, the objectives themselves, too.

The following sample activities are just that - samples. This is the way it worked in one Kindergarten class one semester. In other classrooms, the outcome is likely to be different, depending on the students and the teacher. To try to force the sample activities on children will be against the whole language philosophy; however, they will serve as a guide for the teacher who then needs to allow the children's individual and collective interests and abilities to mold the lessons. All the activities can be done using one copy of the chosen story as children will be making their own books to read independently later on. This saves considerable amount of money in situations where the budget is very tight and parent resources limited.

The Lebanese KG experience with whole language

The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle was selected as an ideal 'language story' because it had the potential of being highly generative, allowing for several themes and concepts to be generated by the children (and the teacher). The story contained also much repetitious language, the days of the week, and the numbers one through five that were part of the requirements for the class. The story is about a hungry little caterpillar which eats through a variety of edibles over a week, gets a stomachache, and, after spending time in a self-built cocoon, emerges as a colorful butterfly.

The class of 26 four-year olds was taught by Betty Saade, a Lebanese-Canadian teacher in a private rural school in Lebanon. Betty has no formal teacher training, which is not at all an uncommon situation in Lebanon, especially in the Primary grades. However, Betty had attended some in-service training sessions and was very keen to try something that she thought would be better than the worksheets she had been using. The following is not an ideal model, but an experiment aiming to apply the whole language philosophy within existing financial and administrative constraints.

Before Betty introduced the story to the class, we had identified potential concepts and vocabulary for the story that met, or exceeded, the requirements for the program set for the class. (See Table 1.) After discussing the whole language philosophy and how I thought it might work for the children she taught, we made a plan of possible activities. Betty then introduced the story to the children by asking if they would like to hear a story she had just received (instead of the usual "today we are going to learn about..." she had been accustomed to doing). As predicted, the children received the idea with enthusiasm, and she proceeded to read the story. However, at the conclusion of the story, she did not begin to ask the usual questions about the events and

details of the story - she sat and waited for a few seconds. She did not need to wait for more than that when children began commenting on the story. All through the discussion, Betty followed the leads from the children and decided to follow the most prominent interest, food. Most of the children's discourse was in L1 (Arabic) since the children's exposure to English, with few exceptions, did not exceed four months. When children engaged in L1, Betty used reflective listening and "echoed" back comments in English, often extending a question to other children:

Rania: Ana ma bhib elkabees *(I don't like pickles.)*

Teacher (nodding to Rania): *"You don't like pickles".*

(To class): *"Does Rania like pickles?" (pointing to the pickle in the book.)*

Class: *"No!"*

Teacher: *"That's right. She doesn't like pickles. Pickles are sour (makes a face to indicate sour taste). Who likes pickles?"*

Three children: *"Ana, ana!" (Me, me)*

Teacher: *"Ah. You like pickles. Hani, Tanya and Zeina like pickles. I like strawberries (pointing to strawberries in the book), they are sweet. Mmmm! Who likes strawberries?"*

Several children: *"Me!" "[Ana!]" (Me)*

Teacher: *"It seems that we all like strawberries. They are sweet. Are strawberries sweet?"*

Class: *"Yes!"*

This provided necessary modeling and repetition without the out-of-context drill flavor. Children were enjoying themselves and were actively participating in a meaningful use of new language. With young children, it seems to be an advantage if the teacher is familiar with the children's native language, even if she only uses L2 herself. Betty's knowledge of Arabic enabled her to repeat children's comments in English and reduce the frustration and loss of

motivation that may result from the lack of communication between the teacher and the children. This is specially significant with young children whose communicative skills even in L1 are still developing and who are already facing the stress of being separated from the familiar home environment and their caregiver. When classroom discourse is structured so that the teacher frequently solicits hypothesis formulation - something that predictable books are excellent for - and extends questions, children's thinking is stimulated while teacher's frequent modeling of structures and vocabulary builds their receptive language.

After the story session, children were given the customary 'free time'. They could choose the writing / drawing table supplied with paper and crayons, the house-keeping corner, or the block and toy center. After the first reading of the story, some children headed for the writing table. (See Figure 1.) The story reading continued during the week. Betty read the story several times, at times using the pointer to follow the text as she read. Some children began to repeat the key words, and soon the class was reading chorally. Some children began to seek the book out during their free time, taking turns to 'read' it to each other. After 6 days, the demand for the book became so great that it was natural to suggest that each one should have their personal copy. (See Figure 2.) By the time the books were ready, most children were able to 'read' their story and take it home. One copy was made for the class library.

Following are three sample days from the experiment, the first and the second day, and a day about one week into the unit.

Day 1 Story: <u>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</u> (Eric Carle)

Children arrive

Calendar activity and 'morning conversation'

Story time

Teacher reads The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle. After reading, teacher follows children's lead and discussion centers around their favorite foods. Much of the discourse is in Arabic, children's L1 with teacher repeating comments in L2, elaborating and extending questions to different children.

Free time

Several children settle down with paper and colored pencils to draw 'things they like' as invited by teacher. Several food items appear in the drawings, demonstrating influence of the story.

Physical activity indoors (due to rain)

Teacher asks the children how do they think caterpillars move and children eagerly demonstrate.

Washroom visit before snack time.

Teacher has the children line up and go through *the doorway. (If resources permit, the preposition could be demonstrated by hanging large paper fruit across the doorway for children to go through, just as the caterpillar went through the fruit.)*

Snack time

Children spontaneously refer to the story as they identify some of the caterpillar's food in each others' lunch boxes and munch through their food. Animated discussions in L1 with a sprinkling of L2. Teacher circulates among the children, making comments in English and extending questions to children.

Whole class activity

Teacher introduces picture bingo to class. (See figure 3) Pictures are drawn from the story and the teacher goes through each picture, identifying them. Many of the children repeat the words after her.

Free time

Children have a choice of puzzles, picture books and art table.

Brief break, after which the L1 teacher takes over the class.

Day 2

Children arrive.

Calendar activity

The day is Tuesday, and children want to remember what the caterpillar had eaten on Tuesday. There is some disagreement, and the teacher suggests they check it in the story. The story is brought out and children request a reading of the whole story after checking Tuesday's food. (This went as we had planned.)

Story is read again.

Teacher directs the children's attention to the numbers in the story and a math lesson naturally follows. Children are all familiar with numbers one and two and now focus on three. Children are eager to demonstrate their number knowledge and much counting goes on.

Free time

Children have again the choice of activity. The story influence is clearly increasing as children playing with blocks count them and organize them into groups. At the writing table, numbers appear next to drawings of fruit and other food items.

Before snack time, teacher introduces The Caterpillar Chant written for this project and children eagerly join in.

Snack time

Children continue to be interested in food items and try to find who has 'caterpillar food' in their lunch box. Some counting of cookies and candy bars also goes on. Some children chew holes into their flat

Arabic bread, saying they are caterpillars.

Outdoor activity

Several children 'pop' around as the caterpillar emerged from the egg and float around butterfly fashion: 'Look, look, butterfly!'

A week into the unit

During the calendar activity, children still refer to the caterpillar's diet. Children are now joining the teacher in choral reading of the story, and some children express interest in reading the story to the class. Two little girls have prepared themselves and take turns 'reading' . They have memorized several lines of the story and their presentation is highly enjoyable to the class and many children chant parts of the story with them. Teacher suggests that perhaps the class could re-tell the story so she could write in on the flip chart for everyone to see the words well. As children begin to re-tell the story, there is much discussion b[illegible]re agreement about the correct lines is reached. Children frequently request to check in the book so that 'it will be right'.

The teacher has brought in three silkworms from a local grower and children help her set up a corner where the silkworm box can be kept safely. Children examine the mulberry tree leaves, the food that the silkmoth caterpillars eat. The color and texture of the leaves are talked about, but the children's main interest is focused on the caterpillars. They note that these are not the same color as the caterpillar in the story. Children spend much of their free time observing the caterpillars.

During playground time, several children include concepts and vocabulary from the story in their play. 'Pop' is very popular, so is floating around in butterfly fashion: "Look, look, [I am] butterfly!"

The teacher observes that several children seem to have internalized the number concepts of 'three', 'four' and 'five' and can rapidly identify number of items in a group without actually having to count.

Children play alphabet bingo using vocabulary from the story. (See figure). They also learn a "Caterpillar chant" written for this experiment. (See table 2 *)*

Other activities that were introduced included picture-sorting, number bingo, dramatizations with a sock puppet, painting butterflies and making paper mache cocoons. A grocery store corner was set up that incorporated concepts related to the story, mainly fruit and other foods. In this class, children incorporated much vocabulary and concepts from the story into their daily free time activities from day one, with the number and frequency of words increasing as the days went by.

Caveat

For the whole language approach to work in an EFL context where the children get very little or no exposure to English outside the class, the teacher must have near-native fluency of the target language, and, especially when working with young children, should be familiar with children's L1. Without the L1 knowledge, the teacher is not going to be able to use reflective listening and thus communication will be limited.

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Irma Ghosn teaches English and Education at the Lebanese American University in Byblos, Lebanon. She has lectured and conducted teacher development workshops in Lebanon, Syria, United Arab Emirates and the USA

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Table 1.

Concepts and target vocabulary identified for The Very Hungry Caterpillar
(tentative, as children's interests would be accommodated)

butterfly life cycle	*days of the week*
on; through; out of; inside	*hungry*
food groups	*eat; ate*
numbers 1- 5	*caterpillar*
stomachache	*cocoon*
apple; plum; orange; strawberry	*tiny; big; fat*

Note: In the experimental class the vocabulary grew to include particular children's favorite foods: hamburger, fries, bananas, honey.
In another class, with another group of children, the vocabulary will reflect the particular children's interests.

Table 2.

Caterpillar Chant

Sing to the tune of Freire Jacques, or chant as a Jazz chant

Caterpillar, caterpillar,
How are you? How are you?
Inside your cocoon, inside your cocoon
What do you do? What do you do?

Figure 1.

Children's drawings after the first reading of the story. The teacher told the children that "they could draw whatever they liked". Several children included items from the story. (Teacher recording of the children's descriptions of their drawings show on some of the pictures.)

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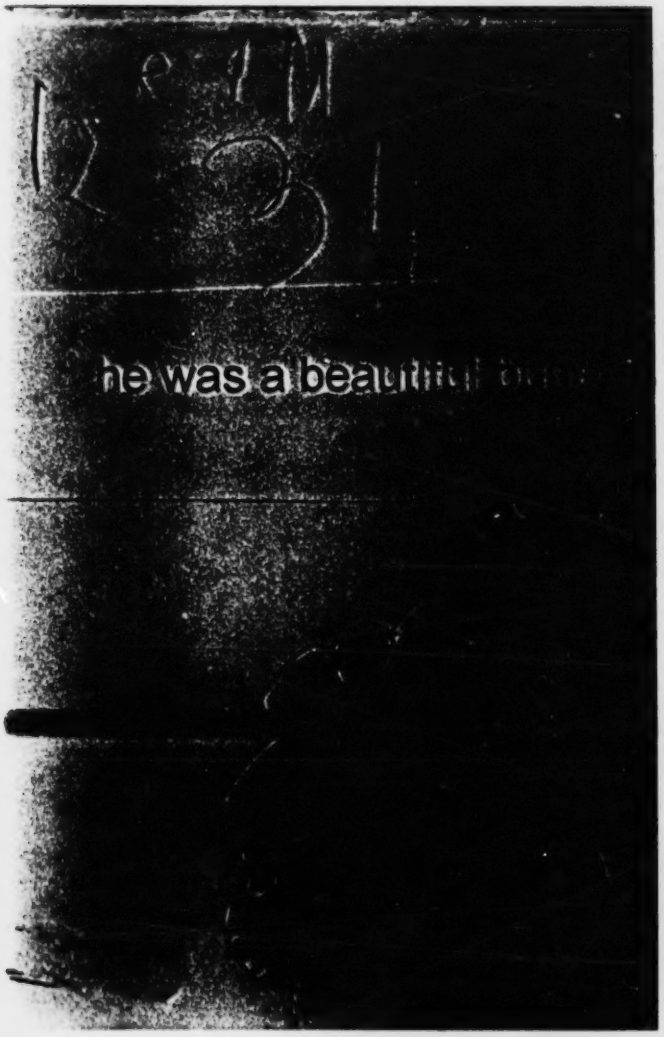
As the book became excessively popular, the teacher invited the children to make their own books. One was made also for the class library.



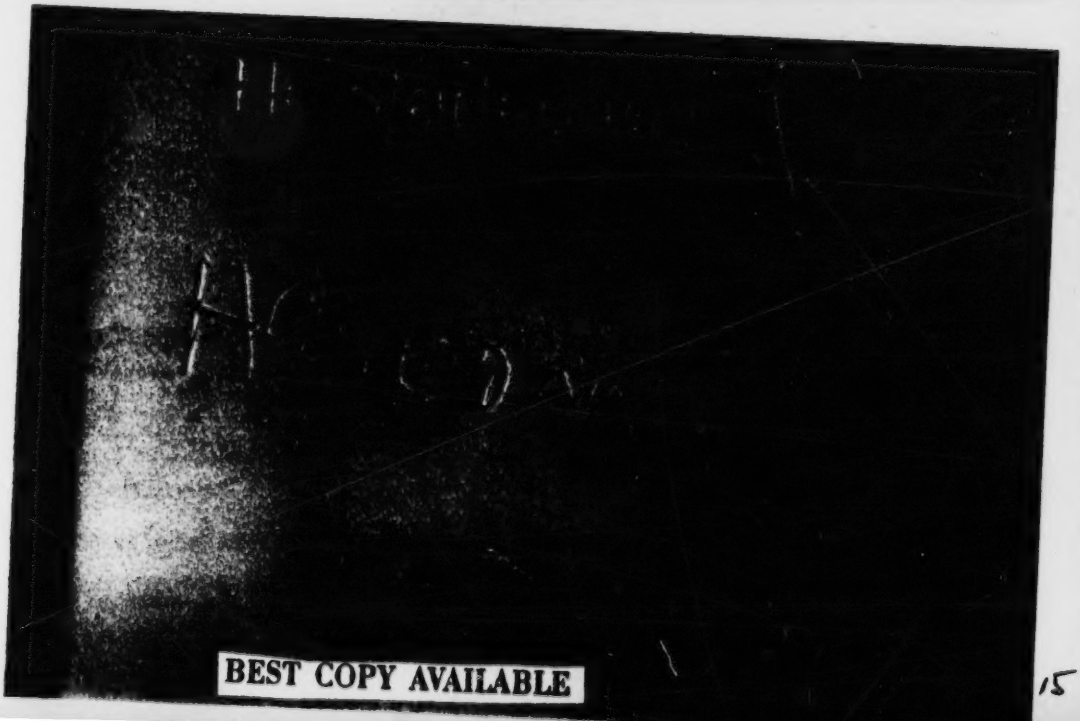


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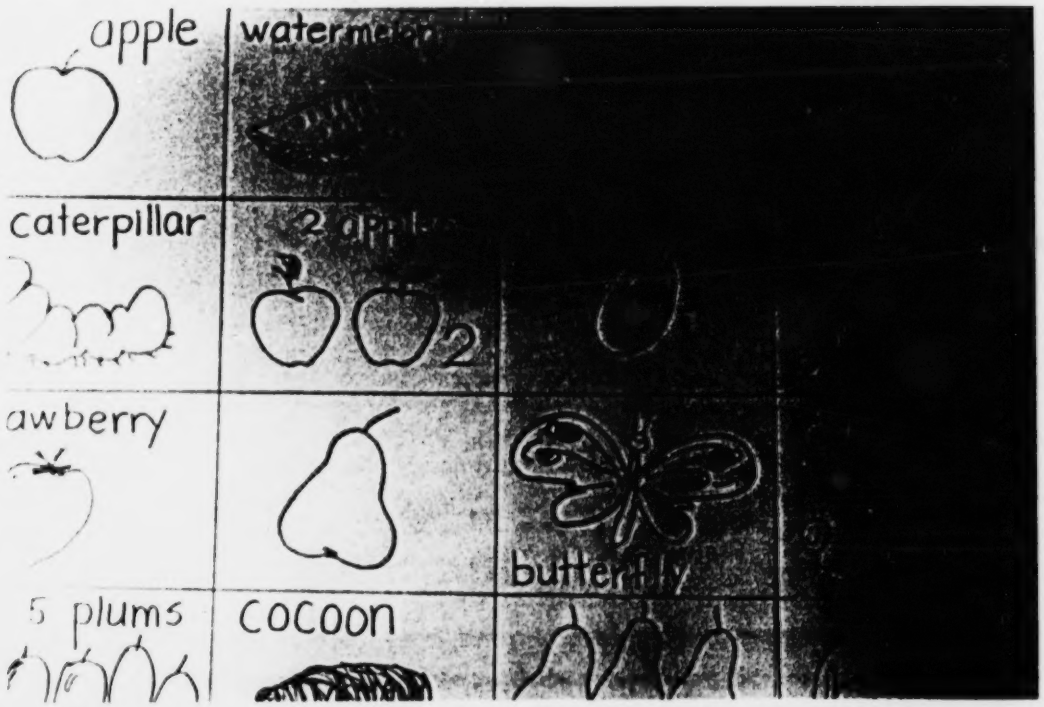
Figure 3.

Simple bingo boards were constructed by the teacher



16